

PRISONS HOUSE A MORE CHALLENGING INMATE POPULATION

A Brief Historical Overview

Policy decisions aimed at managing the growing population and reducing the number of offenders with misdemeanor and probation violations in North Carolina prisons have resulted in an inmate population with a higher concentration of volatile and potentially violent offenders. The challenging task of supervising this more dangerous population while ensuring the safety of staff and inmates requires a renewed focus on safety and security.

In 1994, the General Assembly enacted the Structured Sentencing Act, which was designed to achieve truth in sentencing while prioritizing and managing correctional resources. It was generally understood at the time that the changes brought about by the Structured Sentencing Act would fundamentally affect the prison population in several ways, and not just in raw numbers.

The most significant concern for the Department of Correction at that time was that the population would become a more dangerous group of inmates. Under Fair Sentencing, judges had wide latitude to sentence offenders to prison, and would send low-level offenders with short sentences to the state system. Structured Sentencing intentionally kept these offenders in the community on probation, so they would only reach prison by violating their conditions.

In 2011, the General Assembly passed the Justice Reinvestment Act, which reduced admissions to prison and increased accountability in the community with probationers. The act prompted several key changes to sentencing policy. One significant change made in act as later revised was to redirect all misdemeanants into county custody. As a consequence, lower-risk inmates were moved out of state prisons, resulting in a more concentrated population of violent repeat offenders.

As of June 2017, 68% of the prison population was Class A-E felons, up 30% over 20 years, and 36% had Prior Record Levels of IV, V, or VI, up 31% over the same 20-year period. These findings are laid out in the table below.

Year	Total Pop.	A-E Felons	A-E %	PR IV-VI	PR %
1997	32,529	12,389	38%	1,643	5%
2002	32,503	17,795	55%	6,823	21%
2007	37,645	21,376	57%	10,414	28%
2012	36,733	23,875	65%	12,037	33%
2017	35,345	23,947	68%	12,755	36%

Moreover, due to the decline in the adult mental health system in North Carolina, more individuals with chronic mental illness are in the state's prisons. The number of inmates diagnosed/treated for mental illness has increased by 65 % in the past 10 years, from 3,693 in FY 06-07 to 6,103 in FY 16-17. Additional training and resources for staff are necessary to meet the demands of managing this more challenging inmate population.